Thorne Guy

The Air Pirate

Guy Thorne
The Air Pirate

http://www.litres.ru/pages/biblio_book/?art=23158251
The Air Pirate:

Содержание

Thorne Guy
The Air Pirate

Dedication

TO PERCY BURTON, Esq.

In memory of a certain celebrated walk from Great Holland to Frinton-on-Sea, and the salmon we met at the end of it. With all good wishes from the Author.

CHAPTER I
THE COMMISSIONER OF AIR POLICE FOR GREAT BRITAIN RIDES TO PLYMOUTH IN GOOD COMPANY

Nearly two years ago a leading London daily newspaper said: "The Government have assured us that all danger from present and future air piracies is now over, and that the recent events which so startled and horrified both this country and the United States of America can never recur. For our own part we accept that assurance, and we do not think that the Commissioner of Air Police for the British Government will be caught napping again.

"In saying this we do not in the least mean to imply that Sir John Custance could either have foreseen or prevented the astounding mid-Atlantic tragedies. Sir John, though barely thirty years of age, is an official in every way worthy of his high position, an organizer of exceptional ability and a pilot of practical experience. Press and public are perfectly well aware that it is owing to his personal exertions that our magnificent Transatlantic air-liners are no longer stricken down by the Night Terror of the immediate past. And in saying this much, we have both a suggestion and a request to make.

"The inner history of the piracies is only fully known to one man. It is a story, we understand, that puts the imagination of the boldest writer of fiction to shame. Such parts of it as have been made public hint at a story of absorbing interest behind. The bad old days of censorship and secrecy have vanished with the occasions that made them necessary. We suggest that a full and detailed 'story' of the first – and we trust the last – Air Pirate should be written, and given to the world. And we call upon that most popular public man, Sir John Custance, to do this for us. He alone knows everything."

At the time that it appeared I read the above to Charles Thumbwood, my little valet, as I finished breakfast, in my Half Moon Street chambers.

"Not *quite* correct, Charles. You know almost as much about it as I do. To say nothing of a certain friend …"

"I wouldn't say that, Sir John," said Charles, brushing my light overcoat. "Though I rode part of the course alongside of you; to say nothing of Mr. Danjuro." Thumbwood was a jockey before I took him into my service. "Are you going to write it all down, Sir John?"

"That depends on several things, and on one person especially. I must think it all over."

Think it over I did as I drove to my offices in Whitehall – the Scotland Yard of the Air – and I discussed it afterwards with a certain lady…

Which is how the following narrative came to be written,

though I did not complete it until the best part of two years had elapsed.

II

I never did any flying during the Great War. I was too young, being only fifteen and at Eton when Peace was signed. But from the very earliest days that I can remember aviation fascinated me as nothing else could. My father, the first baronet, left me a moderate fortune. He died when I was eighteen, and instead of going to Oxford, I entered as a cadet in the R.F.C. It is not necessary to detail how, when I had earned my wings, I joined the civil side of flying and became a pilot-commander in the Transatlantic Service. I had a good deal of influence behind me, and, to cut a long story short, at twenty-eight I was Assistant, and at thirty Chief Commissioner of the British Air Police. I was answerable to Government alone, and, within its limits, my powers were absolute.

It was on a morning in late June, the 25th to be exact, when the wheels began to move. I date the start of everything from that morning. About one o'clock on the preceding night Thumbwood had waked me from refreshing sleep. A wireless message, in code, had been received at Whitehall. It was addressed to me personally, and was from the Controller of the White Star Air Line at Plymouth. My people at Whitehall, on night duty, thought it of sufficient importance to send on even at this hour.

As soon as I was thoroughly awake, and had done cursing Thumbwood, I read the message. It only said that a matter of the gravest importance required my personal presence at Plymouth, and would I come down at once.

Now considerable experience of the fussy great men who controlled the air-liner companies, which linked up England with all parts of the world, had made me somewhat sceptical of these urgent demands for my presence. More than once I had to explain that I was not at the beck and call of any commercial magnate, and if I had made myself disliked in certain quarters I had, at least, made my office respected.

Accordingly I scribbled instructions to the chief inspector on duty that he should send a wireless to Plymouth requesting further details. Then I went to sleep again.

As a matter of fact, I *was* going to Plymouth the next morning in any case, though on private business. Sir Joshua Johnson, Controller of the White Star Line, did not, of course, know that. His midnight message was a coincidence.

I could have flown down from Whitehall in my fast police yacht in an hour, but, as it happened, I was going to train from Paddington. Sir Joshua could wait until I turned up some time after lunch.

How well I remember the morning of my departure from town. The long departure platform at Paddington was crowded with well-dressed, happy-looking people, as I stood by the door of my reserved carriage in the Riviera Express – that superb train,

with its curved roof, which runs to Plymouth without a stop.

Thumbwood, invaluable little man, filled the carriage with flowers, great bunches of white lilac and June roses, and the station-master, who came up for a chat, looked curiously at the bower my valet had made. The Chief Commissioner of Air Police was not wont to travel like that!

For my part, I was wildly exhilarated, and at the same time, as nervous as a boy making his first flight. To-day might prove one of the happiest or quite the most miserable of my life. I was going to put it to the test. Confound it, why didn't Connie come?

On this morning Miss Constance Shepherd, the young light-comedy actress, adored of London, and to me the rose of all the roses, was travelling down to Plymouth to catch the air-liner starting from that port to New York at eight-thirty this evening. And she had promised to travel with me!

Would she have done so, I kept on asking myself, if she didn't know quite well what I meant to say to her? Or was it just friendliness? I knew she liked me.

… Why didn't she come? Here it was, only eight minutes before the train started. As I searched the platform, with an eye that strove to appear calm and unconcerned, I saw faces that I knew – faces of theatrical celebrities, two or three of the prettiest girls in England, a handsome, hook-nosed young man, who was, perhaps, the best known theatrical manager in London, two eminent comedians carrying bouquets. And the Press photographers were beginning to arrange their cameras…

I had completely forgotten what a tremendous celebrity dear little Connie was. I might have known they'd have given her a send-off on her way to the States. All the same, it annoyed me, as it seemed to be annoying a tall, hatchet-faced man in Donegal tweeds, who scowled at the little crowd. Was he a friend, too, I wondered?

She came at last, very late of course, and after a brief smile at me, underwent the public ceremonies of the occasion, while I – I own it – retired into the carriage for a minute or two. But I saw the cameras click, and the girls embrace, and the crowd of sightseers trying to push into the charmed circle, and then Connie was in the corridor, leaning out of the window, waving and smiling as the train began to move to an accompaniment of loud cheers.

"My dear Connie, royalty isn't in it!" I said, as she stepped laughingly into the carriage, and I pushed the sliding door home.

"Oh, they're dears!" she said, "and they do really mean well, despite the fact that we shall all be in the picture papers to-morrow morning, and that's good for business."

"I thought you were never coming."

"It is an impression I convey," she answered; "but I'm very careful, really. My maid was here with the luggage half an hour ago. What lovely flowers you have got for me, John!"

She lay back in her seat as the train gathered speed and Ealing flashed by with a roar, and I feasted my eyes on the fairest picture in the world.

She wore a simple travelling coat and skirt of white piqué, and

the white lilac was all about her, framing her face as she held up a branch to inhale its fragrance. All England knew that face in the days when little Connie sang and danced herself into the heart of the public, but none knew it as well as I.

How can I describe that marvellous hair of dark chestnut, those deep amethyst eyes, and the perfect bow of lips which were truer to the exact colour of coral than any I have ever seen? It only makes a catalogue after all. It's the expression – the soul, if you like – that makes the true face; and here was one so frank and kind and sweet that when one looked it seemed as if hands were placed beneath the heart, lifting it up!

On one other day only did I see her more lovely than she was now.

Well, it was too early to say what I wanted to say, and, besides, I was nervous as yet. We hadn't settled down. As I expected, her breakfast had consisted of tea and a macaroon, so I produced a basket – lunch was to come later – in which a silver box of caviare sandwiches was surrounded by crushed ice in a larger box of zinc. There was also iced hock and seltzer water. We both felt more at home in a few minutes.

We had lit our cigarettes, and I was thinking hard, when someone passing along the corridor looked in upon us for a moment. I had an impression of a brown face and a scowl. It was the man in tweeds that I had noticed at Paddington.

"That *beast*!" said Connie suddenly.

I turned and looked at her. She was frowning adorably, and I

thought she looked rather pale.

"D'you know him, then?"

"I did, and I simply hate him."

"Who is he?"

"I expect you've heard his name, John. Most people have in town. He is Henry Helzephron, a big man in your way once."

I *did* know the name as that of a pilot of extraordinary courage and ability during the Great War. He had gained the Victoria Cross when a lad of twenty, and his exploits during two wonderful years formed part of the history of aviation. He had not flown for years now, and divided his time between the more dissipated haunts of the West End and an estate he had somewhere in Devon or Cornwall, a "has-been" with a sinister reputation, a lounger of thirty-six.

"I know. 'Hawk Helzephron' he used to be called. Gone all to pieces, I understand. But how do *you* know him, dear?"

"He did me the honour to ask me to marry him about two months ago," she answered, "and since then he is always putting himself in my way. He does not speak, but he comes to the theatre and glares. I am always meeting him, and I hate the sight of him. He makes me afraid…"

Here was my chance and I took it like a shot. She should never be unprotected from Helzephrons and all the tribe who haunt the stage door any more!

A successful aviator takes instantaneous decisions. He must. If he hesitates he's lost.

What I said, as the Riviera Express hurled itself through the summer noon, is not part of this narrative. I daresay I was no more original than most men, but the results were eminently satisfactory for, as we ran past the towers and winding river of Exeter, Connie and I were engaged.

I remember that I lugged the ring out of my waistcoat pocket – sapphires and diamonds, a top-shelf ring! – precisely as we glided through Exeter Station.

"O-oh!" said Connie, as the thing winked and shone in the sunlight; and then: "You *wretch*! I'll never forgive you – never!"

I wondered what was the matter. In fact, I asked her.

"You made so sure of me that you actually bought this beforehand!"

"It doesn't do to leave anything to chance," I said, and I made her put it on, and gave her several other things of no particular importance while she was doing it.

For the rest of the journey, past the red cliffs and blue seas of Teignmouth and Paignton, we had a long and happy talk, finding out – of course – all sorts of delightful things about each other which we had only suspected before.

Perhaps there is nothing fresher and more delightful in life than those first few hours of revelation, when a man and a girl who love each other have, at last, become engaged. It is like coming into harbour after an anxious voyage, and yet, all the time there is the splendid knowledge that there are new and marvellous seas waiting to be explored, this time – together!

Connie was to act in New York for a month and in Boston for a fortnight. It was a 'star' engagement, and six weeks would soon pass. Besides, now that Plymouth was barely thirty hours from New York, there was nothing to prevent me from popping over once or twice to see her. I was responsible to no one for my time, and half a dozen quite real matters in connection with my job would provide a valid excuse. After the six weeks were over, why, then, we would be married!

"There is absolutely no reason on earth why we should wait," I told her, in sublime ignorance of what the Fates had in store for both of us. "I'll have a special licence ready, and the day you land again on this side you shall be Lady Custance, darling!"

So it was settled, lightly and happily enough, and when we left the train at Plymouth Station there was not a cloud in the sky or in our hearts.

I found that Mr. Thumbwood had been making excellent use of his time, even as his master had, for the little man was assisting a demure and well-looking maiden to collect luggage, who turned out to be Connie's maid, Wilson.

We left them to it and drove to the Royal Hotel, not before I had seen the train start again on its journey to Cornwall, with Mr. Helzephron – whom I had quite forgotten – standing in the corridor and regarding us with a malignant scowl upon his hawk-like, dissipated countenance. But Mr. Helzephron, and all other men alive, were about six a penny to me just then.

Connie was to leave the sea-drome at eight-thirty in that

fine flying-liner *Atlantis*. She was a Royal Mail ship, and about the fastest and finest flyer in the Transatlantic service, with a carrying capacity of three hundred and fifty passengers, and a thousand tons dead weight of cargo. Her crew numbered forty, and she was commanded by Captain Swainson, one of the most reliable pilot commanders in the air. He was a man I both knew and liked.

Connie wanted a rest and a sleep. "At least, I want to be alone to think it all over!" she said, so she went up to her room in the hotel at once. I arranged to call for her at five, when we would go for a stroll and afterwards have an early dinner. Then I washed my hands and strolled into the famous long bar of the hotel for a sandwich and a whisky and soda, before proceeding to the offices of the White Star Line on the Hoe.

As I munched my sandwich, I wondered what the affair was that had made Sir Joshua Johnson send me a wireless message in the middle of the night – a time when obese old gentlemen should be fast asleep in bed. I had told my people at Whitehall to ask for further particulars, but I had not the least intention of being bothered with them – or any police business whatever – until I had settled my own personal affairs with Connie. Accordingly, when I left my chambers in the morning to go to Paddington, I sent a message to Whitehall to say that I was proceeding to Plymouth during the day, and would wait till my arrival to hear what the business was. Muir Lockhart, my assistant, would perfectly understand, and was quite capable of dealing with

anything that might come along.

The long bar was, as usual, full of naval officers, with a sprinkling of Air Merchant Service men in their uniform of grey, silver and light blue. I saw no one that I knew, until the swing-doors leading into the hotel were flung open, and a wiry little man in the black and silver uniform of my own corps came hurriedly in. His peaked cap, with the silver wings and sword badge, was pushed back on his head, and he was in a state of unenviable heat and perspiration. He was Pilot Superintendent Lashmar, chief of the Ocean Patrol stationed at Plymouth, with equal rank to a lieutenant-commander in the Navy, and one of my most trusted officers in the West.

He went up to the bar and ordered a "long glass of iced ginger-beer, with a dash of gin in it," and then I clapped him on the shoulder. He wheeled round in a second, and when he saw who it was his face changed from anxiety to relief.

"Thank Heaven you're come, sir," he said, as he saluted. "We've been signalling to Whitehall all the morning, and all we could get was that you were on your way. I've been backwards and forwards from the A.P. Headquarters to the White Star Office a dozen times."

"I came down by train, Mr. Lashmar," I said, realizing in an instant that there really *was* something important afoot, and that by bad luck I was behind time. Sir Joshua Johnson was all very well, but when my own people began to send out signals – that was quite another matter.

"We thought you'd fly down in the yacht, sir, and we've been sending wireless trying to pick you up."

"I couldn't. I have had some most important business to attend to. Anyhow, I'm here now. What's it all about?"

"You haven't heard *anything*, sir?" he asked in amazement.

Again I cursed my luck, but I wasn't going to give it away. "We'll go round to Sir Joshua Johnson at once," was all I said.

"That will be best, sir, and then every detail can be put before you in sequence. I have my report with me, written up to date. I think I've taken all possible measures up to the present, but, of course, we've been waiting for you. Sir Joshua, as you may imagine, is half out of his wits."

"He's not had very far to travel, then," I said to gain time. All this was so much Greek to me, and I had to walk warily.

In a minute more Lashmar and I were on the Hoe and approaching the stately offices of the Line, which stood in the very centre of that famous promenade above the blue waters of the Sound.

CHAPTER II FATE OF THE TRANS-ATLANTIC AIR-LINER "ALBATROS"

There were a good many people in both the ante-room and the secretaries' room as I was led to Sir Joshua. I was immediately aware of an unusual stir and excitement, and people nodded and whispered as I passed – "That's Sir John Custance, the Police Commissioner." "I expect there's some news," were two of the *sotto voce* remarks I heard.

Sir Joshua sat in his own magnificent apartment, with the great window looking out over Drake's Island and Mount Edgcombe to the horizon. A tray and a decanter showed that he had lunched there, and there was a good deal of cigar smoke in the air.

Sir Joshua was a tall and corpulent man of nearly seventy, with a red face with little purple veins in the cheeks, a thatch of snow-white hair and close whiskers. He had been an early pioneer of commercial flying, and had reaped his reward in the control of the finest air fleet in the world and the Lord knows how many millions of money. He was distinctly an able and upright man, and his only faults were a slight pomposity and a mistaken idea that the Commissioner of A.P. for Great Britain was a sort of unpaid official of The White Star Line! A good many of the great air-shipping magnates had tried to take that line in the past – and

been snubbed for their pains!

Sir Joshua was not pompous this afternoon, and his face was twitching as he shook hands.

"Thank God you're come, Sir John," he said, "I am almost out of my mind with worry and anxiety. You will agree with me that this affair is as grave as it well can be?"

To that I was diplomatically silent. What I said was: "I have seen Superintendent Pilot Lashmar. What I want now, Sir Joshua, as a preliminary, is a brief and exact account from your own lips."

"Sit down," he said, pushing a padded chair towards me and handing a box of cigars. "You shall have it in a nutshell." He sat down opposite to me, pulled some papers towards him with a hand that shook a little, and began to read.

… "Our liner *Albatros*, carrying the mails, left New York yesterday morning about seven a.m., American time. She was consequently due here at Plymouth about six-thirty this afternoon – Greenwich. The weather conditions at the ten thousand feet mail-ship level were perfect. In addition to the mails there were about two hundred passengers, and she carried, though this was known only to a few officials, a parcel of particularly fine Brazilian diamonds, consigned from Tiffany's of New York to Aaron and Harris, the dealers in precious stones, of Hatton Garden. The jewels were in the ship's safe, in charge of the purser. Various ships – I have the full list – sighted the *Albatros* during the day and exchanged signals, while she duly

reported herself by wireless as she passed each lightship, as soon as dusk fell. The lightships, as you know, are a hundred miles apart from the Fastnet to Long Island, and are connected by cable with our telegraph room here. The indicating dials register, degree by geographical degree, the exact position of any of our ships when in the air. This record is printed on a tape beneath each dial, and each record is examined every hour or two by a clerk."

Of course, I knew all this. The minutest detail of the system was familiar. I wished that Sir Joshua would "cut the cackle and come to the 'osses." No doubt my face showed something of what I felt, for Sir Joshua half apologized.

"You see, Sir John," he said, "I thought it best to prepare some sort of short and coherent statement for the Press. As yet they have got hold of nothing, but we can't possibly keep it much longer. Even you couldn't, with all your powers. And what I am reading is this statement. I particularly want you to hear it, as, of course, it rests with you if it shall be published in this form or not."

I bowed, and Sir Joshua continued:

"At ten o'clock last night the clerk on duty examined the tapes. When he came to the one recording the progress of the *Albatros*, he found that for two hours there was no record of her at all. The last record was that she had passed and signalled to Lightship A. 70 that all was well. A two hours' gap is so unusual, owing to the – er – perfection of our organization, that the clerk was alarmed,

and reported the matter to a superior upstairs.

"A general call to all our ships in the air at that moment was at once sent out, and in a few minutes responses were received from several of them to the effect that the *Albatros* had not been sighted. Nor was there any answer from the ship herself. A signal to Lightship A. 71, the next guide-boat the *Albatros* should have passed, elicited the information that she had never done so. By eleven o'clock all these facts were known in this office. The night staff here became seriously alarmed. By a fortunate coincidence I was attending a performance at the Theatre Royal close by, with Lady Johnson and my daughters. This was known, and a messenger caught me at the close of the play, and I came round at once. I had not been in the offices for five minutes, when news of the most extraordinary and sensational character began to come in from our receiving station by the Citadel.

"Captain Pring, one of our most reliable pilot commanders, was in charge of the *Albatros*. The message was from him, and this is the gist of it. At sundown the *Albatros* was flying on the ten-thousand-foot level. The Lightship A. 70 was some twenty miles astern. No other airships were in sight, when the look-out man reported a boat coming up at great speed from the east. The *Albatros* was doing her steady ninety knots, but as the two ships approached, it was seen that the stranger, a much smaller boat, was flying at an almost incredible rate. Pring reports that she was doing a sixteen to eighteen second mile, but there is doubtless a mistake in the message.

"The boat showed no distinguishing lights, and failed to signal, as she flashed past the liner at the distance of half a mile. There were several curious features about her which attracted attention, though what these were we do not yet know. This strange ship turned and came up with the *Albatros*, actually flying round her in spirals with the greatest ease. Then, without the slightest warning, she opened fire on our vessel, and the first shell, obviously by design, blew away our wireless."

My heart simply bounded within me. This was news with a vengeance! I had to exercise all my self-control not to pour out a stream of frantic questions. It was beyond thinking! Such a thing had not happened since the League of Nations came into being. It might mean hideous war once more – anything!

Sir Joshua had paused to drink a glass of water. He understood the immense gravity of this news as well as I did, and his voice was unsteady as he went on in answer to my nod!

"The *Albatros* was helpless. Since the international agreement that only naval, military and police ships may fly armed, she had no possible means of defence. Flight, even, was impossible, and the loss of her wireless forbade her to summon help. Then the anonymous ship turned a machine gun on her rudder and shot it out of gear. There was nothing for it but to descend to the water and rest on her floats. Pring was forced to give the order, and she planed down. The other ship followed and took the water not two hundred yards away.

"She then signalled in Morse code, with a Klaxon horn, that

she was sending men aboard the *Albatros*, and that if the captain or crew offered the slightest resistance she'd blow her to pieces. They launched a Berthon collapsible boat from a door in the stern fusilage. There were four men in her, all armed with large-calibre automatic pistols, and wearing pilot's hoods and masks with talc eye-pieces, so that it was impossible to identify them. Pring could do nothing at all. He had the passengers to consider. These ruffians cleared out the safe and the women's jewel-cases – they left the mails alone – and in ten minutes they were back again with the loot. The ship lifted and went off in the dark at two hundred miles an hour, leaving the *Albatros*, helpless upon the water.

"It was a business of several hours to rig up a makeshift rudder, but, fortunately, her searchlights were all right, and she kept on signalling with these until she was sighted by a big cargo steamer, a Baltimore to Cadiz boat, coming up from the south, the *Sant Iago*. She took off the passengers and is bringing them home; she's only a fifteen-knot boat, but I have already dispatched one of our smaller liners to pick her up and take the passengers aboard. They ought to be here some time to-morrow.

"The *Sant Iago* has wireless, and was able to communicate, not only with us, but also with the air-yacht *May Flower*, which she sighted on the four-thousand-foot level at dawn. The *May Flower* belongs to Mr. Van Adams, the Philadelphia millionaire, who is crossing to England with a party of friends. She came down to the water and took up Commander Pring and the second officer, and

should be here by tea-time this afternoon. Then we shall know more of this unprecedented, this deplorable business."

"And the *Albatros*, Sir Joshua?"

"A small crew was left on her, and an emergency tender and workmen started at dawn. She ought to be flying again to-night."

I had all the available facts at last, and long before Sir Joshua had finished my mind was busy as a mill. There was going to be the very biggest sort of commotion over this. England and America would be in a blaze of fury within twenty-four hours, and every flying man, from the skippers of the lordly London-Brindisi-Bombay boats, or the Transatlantic Line, to the sporting commercial traveller in a secondhand 50 h.p. trussed-girder blow-fly, would be wagging the admonishing finger at ME.

"Thank you, Sir Joshua. Most lucid, if I may say so. As a clear statement of fact, combined with a sense of vivid narrative, your account could hardly be improved on."

"You think, Sir John …"

"When the time comes to make a statement for the newspapers I would not alter a word."

Thus did the tongue of the flatterer evade a situation that might have been a trifle awkward for me. I rose at that. "I must leave you now, Sir Joshua," I said, "as I have a great deal to see to and must rejoin Mr. Lashmar. Steps have already been taken, and later on in the day I shall be able to tell you more. Meanwhile I shall see Captain Pring directly the *May Flower* arrives, and

before anyone else. Our future action must depend a great deal on his statement."

This was said in my curtest official manner, and then I got out of the room as quickly as I possibly could. Lashmar was waiting, and I took him by the arm and hurried him out of the office.

"I've only just heard full details, Lashmar, and pretty bad they are. Now has anything been done – by us, I mean?"

"I had two of our patrol ships out at two-thirty this morning cruising over a wide area, sir. They are out still, and reporting every hour. No results, no strange airship seen anywhere. I've been out myself up and down the Irish coast and round the Scillies this morning, more for form's sake than anything else. And I've cabled the whole story, as far as we know it, to the States."

"Good! Any reply from them?"

"Their police ships are out from Cape Breton to the Bermudas, but they don't seem to have sighted anything out of the ordinary as yet."

"Of course, it would be like looking for a needle in a haystack along that huge stretch, eight hundred miles if it's an inch. But, as far as I can see, it's up to them; not us."

"You think so, sir?"

"Why, yes. It's a case of sheer rank and daring piracy. It's been organized with great skill, and the pirates, whoever they are, have command of something quite out-size in the way of a ship. There isn't a works in England where such a boat could be built

without our knowing about it before it was launched. And it's dead certain that there's nowhere in these little islands to hide her. Every single bit of spruce and piano wire with a motor-bicycle engine that can fly ten yards has to be registered and licensed by me. No, this is an American stunt."

We had been crossing the Hoe as we talked, in the direction of the Citadel, and we now came to the long, low building of Dartmoor stone, which is the Plymouth Headquarters of the A.P. It is perched on the edge of the cliff, and within five yards of the spot where Sir Francis Drake is said to have finished his game of bowls when the Armada was coming up Channel.

We passed through the gates, where the police sentry presented arms, and began to walk up and down the terrace.

"Signal to Southampton," I ordered, "and get a couple of their fastest boats here at once. They may be useful in an emergency, and it will look as if we are doing something. Ready for action, of course, and with full service ammunition and bombs. Sir Joshua may have a fit if he likes, but there is nothing to be done until we know more – unless you can suggest anything?"

The little man shook his head. He was keen as a terrier, of course, and he had already acted with great promptitude and wisdom.

Just then an orderly came out on to the terrace and handed me a signal.

I read it out to Lashmar: "Air-yacht *May Flower* just passed St. Mary's doing ninety knots." It was from our most westerly

A.P. station on Tresco in the Scillies. Lashmar made a rough calculation: "Twenty-five miles west-sou'-west of Land's End, add another seventy – she'll be here just under the hour, sir."

"Then I tell you what, Mr. Lashmar, go and meet her and escort her home. Not a living soul must speak to Captain Pring before I do – not even Sir Joshua or any of the White Star people. Give that as my orders when you meet the yacht. But put it very politely to Mr. Van Adams – my compliments and that sort of thing. He's the sort of person who could buy the goodwill of the universe for ready money. Make your escort appear a compliment from the Government!"

Lashmar never wasted words. He understood exactly, saluted, and hurried to the electric railway, which ran down like a chute into the sea-drome far below. I lit a cigarette and watched, and it was a sight worth watching.

Beyond, stretched the largest sea-drome in Great Britain, a harbour within a harbour, surrounded by massive concrete walls. In the roughest weather, when even within the distant breakwater the Sound is turbulent, the sea-drome is calm as a duck-pond. Now it was like a sheet of polished silver, and resting on their great floats at their moorings were three gigantic air-liners, with electric launches and motor-boats plying between them and the landing-stages.

Right in the centre was the splendid *Atlantis*, graceful as a swan, by which Connie was to leave for the States in a few hours. She was surrounded by a swarm of boats no bigger than water-

beetles from where I stood.

A bell rang, there was a rumbling sound, and from a tunnel just beneath me the car, with Lashmar in it, shot down to the water like a stone running down a house roof. As the car dwindled to a punt, a match-box, and finally a postage stamp, I heard the creak and swish of the semaphore behind me on the roof of the station. On the far side of the sea-drome was our Patrol Ship No. 1, stream-line fusilage, with the familiar red, white and blue line, snow-white planes, guns fore and aft, and twin propellers of phosphor bronze winking white-hot in the afternoon sun.

The semaphore was sighted in five seconds. I got a pair of glasses, and saw that the engines were already "ticking over" as Lashmar jumped into a launch and went over the pool, with a cream-white wake behind him and two ostrich plumes of spray six feet high at the bows. He was on board in less time than it takes to write it. I heard the faint throbbing of the four high-compression engines change to the drone of a hornet. No. 1 Patrol slid over the water until her floats lifted – lifted until they barely touched the surface, and she was clear. One clean spiral over Pinklecombe way, and then, as she mounted, she turned and was off over Rams Head like an arrow from a bow. Though I say it that shouldn't, my officers and men of the A.P. were just about as good as they're made!

There was a good three-quarters of an hour to spare, and the Royal Hotel was not four minutes away. After the recent excitements a cup of tea with Connie seemed just the thing. As

I legged it over the Hoe, I realized that I might be very busy for some time, and, in consequence, late for dinner. I must tell my girl that something of great importance had happened, though, in any case, I was determined to see her off, come what might.

Then I remembered something. As Chief Commissioner I had absolute control over the airports of England in a time of crisis. In any case, it would be as well to, close the sea-drome in preparation for the *May Flower's* arrival. I should then be certain that no one could possibly get at Captain Pring before I could. And if I chose to detain even the Royal Mail for half an hour later on in the evening – under the circumstances! – no one would say me nay.

There is a telephone box in the hall of the Royal Hotel. In thirty seconds my orders were given, and not a living soul would enter or leave Plymouth sea-drome without my permission. Then I strolled into the winter gardens, where I found Connie sitting at a little table among tubs of azaleas and listening to the strains of a ladies' orchestra.

"I've half an hour and ten minutes exactly, darling," I said, putting my watch on the table and helping her to early strawberries. "Tell me when the time's up, and then I must rush away for an hour before we dine."

Straightway I forgot all about the *Albatros*, Captain Pring, and the mysterious armed ship in mid-Atlantic.

Knowing what I know now, I wonder how I could have taken it so lightly, even then. But grave and serious as the affair

was, amazing, too, in its boldness, an elaborate and unexpected masterpiece of crime, it seemed remote and very far away, like something one reads of in a foreign newspaper, never conceiving that it can have anything to do with one's own *personal* life.

If only I could have peeped but a little way into the future!

CHAPTER III "COLD-BLOODED PIRACY IN THE HIGH AIR"

Pilot-commander Pring was a tall, lean, lantern-jawed officer, who, though of English nationality, had spent most of his life in America. His face was still pale and grim with passion and mortification as I closed the door of my private room at the A.P. Station on him, Mr. Van Adams, the multi-millionaire, and Mr. Rickaby, second officer of the *Albatros*.

"Now, gentlemen, sit down, please," I said. "And I will ask Captain Pring a few questions. Sir Joshua Johnson has given me the main facts, but I want details. I won't detain you long, but I felt I ought to see you before anyone else."

"Oh, quite!" said Mr. Van Adams, a fleshy man, with a watchful eye and a jaw like a pike.

"This is an extraordinary affair, Captain Pring," I went on. "But, thank goodness, you haven't lost your ship, or any lives. I know what you feel about the *Albatros*."

"She is father, mother, brother, sister, hired girl and dog under the waggon to me!" said Pring, and then he blazed up into fury. I disentangle the few words I can. The majority were too overdressed for respectable society.

"… His Majesty's Mails! First time in history of flying, and it's happened to ME! Cold-blooded piracy in the High Air! They'd

have blown us to pieces as soon as look at us! When I get hold of that slime-lapping leper, the pirate skipper, I won't leave him hide or hair to cover the wart he calls his heart! …" and so on, for a good two minutes by the office chronometer.

I let him rip. It was the quickest way. It's dangerous to throttle down a man like Pring.

"The Captain is, naturally, furious," I said.

"Oh, quite!" answered Mr. Van Adams.

Then we got to business. "The strange airship, Captain Pring. Let's begin with that. She approached you flying *West*, I understand?"

"She did, Sir John. Does that put you wise to anything?"

"It would appear that she was coming from Europe. But that was probably a trick. She might have been waiting about for hours."

"Curious thing, then, that all the ships in the air during the last thirty hours that were within fifteen hundred miles of the American and Canadian coast never saw anything of her. The Air Police of the U.S.A. have questioned every registered boat, Transatlantic and coastal trade, and not one of them sighted her. And, as you know, Sir John, from Cape Race to Charleston in summer weather the air's as thick with craft as gnats over a pond. Ain't that so, Mr. Van Adams, sir?"

"Quite, Captain Pring."

"I see your inference. Well, we'll leave that for a moment. I understand that there were some peculiar features about this ship.

What were they?"

"She's the fastest thing in the air, bar none. That I can swear to. A pilot of my experience can't well be deceived, and if that ship – she's one of the very few I've seen with four propellers – can't do two hundred and forty miles an hour, *without a following wind, mind*, then I'm a paretic!"

I whistled. Such speeds had been dreamed of but never known. "Nearly three times hurricane velocity!" I said.

"She'd race the dawn, Sir John! and that's my honest belief. There's never been such a flying boat before. And she don't carry a crew of more than twelve or fifteen men, in my opinion. The rest's all engines and petrol. She ain't more than twice the size of one of your patrol ships, all over."

This was talking! Each moment the affair grew more tense and interesting.

"That narrows our field of search no end," I remarked. "A boat like that can't be built anywhere in the world without leaving traces."

"It colours the cat different, sure," said Captain Pring. "Now, here's another point. Gum! I'm going to startle you some more, Sir John, but, as God sees me, I'm speaking truth. Here's Mr. Rickaby here as'll swear to all I say…"

He looked at the second officer, a good-looking, brown-faced lad. "It's all gospel, Sir John," he broke in.

"Of course," I said impatiently, "I know you couldn't be mistaken, Pring, and I won't insult you by thinking you'd pull

a Chief Commissioner's leg over an affair of this importance. What's number two? Let's have it!"

"The man who runs her, or the man who built her, has solved another problem. He's produced silent engines at last! That ship's motors don't make more noise than a June bug! On a dark night she could pass within two hundred yards of you, and you'd never guess that she was near."

From that moment I saw the thing in its true proportions. From that moment the air became unsafe. A man-eating tiger let loose upon a quiet country-side was not a tithe as dangerous.

The three other men saw that I understood.

"The scoundrels who came aboard the *Albatros* and looted the ship. What of them?"

"They were masked so's their mothers wouldn't, have known 'em. Armed to the teeth, too. We'd have downed them quick enough, even at the cost of a life or two, but there was the pirate with a four-inch gun trained on us. And she meant business. I did right, Sir John?"

The poor fellow's voice shook, and his face was corrugated with anxiety.

"I should have done exactly the same myself under the circumstances, Pring. Your first duty was to the women and children under your care. That view, I am certain, will be accepted by the company and the Government, to say nothing of the public, when it gets out. About these men, again, did you judge them to be American or foreigners?"

"They didn't speak much, except, to give a few orders. But what they *did* say I heard, every word. I was with them all the time, and so was Mr. Rickaby here. I'll spring another surprise on you, Sir John, and then I've done. *Those chaps were English, every one of them.* And, what's more, they weren't any plug-ugly crowd neither! They were educated men of some social position, club men at some time or other, or I'm a short sport!"

The second officer spoke. "Captain Pring is perfectly right, sir," he said modestly. "I'll swear that they had been public school or 'Varsity men at some time or other."

"Where were you?" I asked quickly.

"Harrow, sir."

I nodded. Here was another astounding fact for consideration when I was alone.

"And then, after a time," Pring continued, "the *Sant Iago* tramp steamer freighter came up from way down South and rescued us. After that we sighted the lights of Mr. Van Adams' air yacht, the *May Flower*, and in answer to our signal he came down and took me and Rickaby aboard."

"Quite," said the laconic millionaire.

"To-night, Captain Pring, I shall want a long talk with you. Now I must surrender you to Sir Joshua. For the present, I want you all three to give me your words of honour that you will tell no one at all anything about the appearance or speed of the ship, that her engines were silent, or you suspect the ruffians on her to be English. That is most important. In fact, I must make it an order,

under the powers with which I am invested by the Secretary of State. As an order, it cannot apply, to you, Mr. Van Adams, but you have been so kind and helpful hitherto that I feel sure you'll give me your promise? You must see how necessary it is."

Mr. Van Adams was going to use his word-of-all-work, I saw it coming, when he changed his mind.

"I'm on," he said instead.

The two pilots gave me their assurances, and we walked out of the office together. As we went along the terrace Pring pointed down to the sea-drome, where the millionaire's air yacht, a beautiful boat, painted cream colour and black, was now resting at her moorings.

"The *Atlantis* starts to-night," he said significantly.

"She will be escorted by an armed patrol," I said, "until she meets one of the American A.P. ships in mid-ocean. Surely, you don't think there's any danger?"

To tell the truth, I had been so concentrated upon the matter in hand that I had hardly given a thought to the outgoing liner. Can you blame me? Anyway, duty came before any private considerations. Now, Pring's remark started a new set of thoughts. I looked at him with great anxiety. He did not know the whole of my reason, but he saw that I was disturbed.

"No, Sir John," he answered, "I don't think the danger worth the waggle of a mule's ear. It was only a passing remark. It stands to reason that Captain Kidd'll know that the police boats of two hemispheres are out looking for him in swarms by now. He'll

figure that out, sure. If he was to start any of his stunts within the next few days, he'd have about as much chance as a fat man in Fiji."

"That's what I thought."

"You may make your mind easy about the *Atlantis*, sir. Besides, as you say, to put the lid on, she'll be escorted."

"Quite," I said involuntarily, and then we both laughed.

"Royal Hotel at ten-thirty," I said. "I shall be staying there tonight."

I shall never forget that dinner with Connie. One of her greatest charms is her serene light-heartedness. It is not silliness or frivolity, don't think that, but the bloom upon the fruit of a clear and happy nature whose conscience is at rest. My girl wasn't a fool. She was not ignorant of evil and the grey sides of life. But they left her untouched. Perhaps her very simplicity, the gay and stainless courage that she wore like a flag through life, had helped her to her great success. The British public might admire and enjoy the work of other artists, but they had taken little Connie Shepherd to their hearts.

She was gay at our dinner, bubbling over with joy and fun. I did my best to respond, but it was rather difficult. There was a shadow on my mind, and it would not go away.

"Dearest old John!" she said once, "what is it? You're sad, inside of you, and you're pretending you're not!"

"Darling, in an hour or two you'll be gone. How can I be very happy?"

She shook her head. "It's not that. You can't deceive me. I don't want to part, either, especially on this day of days. But we are both of us sensible, and we both know it's only for six weeks. You aren't in the least sentimental – horrid word! – nor am I. We go deeper than that."

"Well, then, to tell you the truth" – and it *was* the truth – "I am a bit under the weather, and I can't quite say why. Perhaps it's reaction. But most probably, it's because I have been hearing some news, a matter in connection with my work which has excited me. It's a problem of organization I must solve at once. Forgive me, sweetheart!"

"My dear, if you were not what you are, I should never have said 'yes.' No one has ever had such a position as you at your age, and I know how you've fought for it. I *love* you to be preoccupied about your work."

We finished dinner, however, in a happier mood, and then walked down to the sea-drome together. Connie's heavy luggage had gone to New York by steamer a week ago. The two small trunks she had brought with her from London were already on board the *Atlantis*, and Wilson and Thumbwood carried a couple of dressing-bags.

It was a perfect evening. The sun, in going to rest, had hung the sky with banners, golden and glorious. The music of a band upon the pier came softly up to the terrace of the A.P. Station. Young men and maidens in summer clothes strolled up and down over the greens, and a sickle-shaped new moon was rising over

Devonport and the Hamoaze.

We went down in the electric car, and boarded the *Atlantis* from one of my launches. She was lit up in all her triple decks, as we climbed aboard by the saloon accommodation ladder, and a steward took Connie and her maid to her cabin, while I went to find my old friend, Captain Swainson.

The big, bearded man was sitting alone in his little room. There was a cup of black coffee by his side, and he was chewing an unlighted cigar. I saw at once that he had heard something.

"The very man!" he cried, jumping up from his basket chair and gripping me warmly by the hand. "I heard you were here, Sir John, and I made sure of seeing you before I started. Now what's all this? Sir Joshua's half out of his mind with worry, the offices are turned upside down, and Seth Pring – confound him! – is as close as an oyster!"

I found out that he knew just what Sir Joshua knew, and no more. He was indignant but quite cool, inclined to minimize the whole affair.

It seemed to me that to tell him the whole truth would serve no good purpose.

Pilot Superintendent Lashmar, whom I was going to send in command of the escort, would, of course, know everything.

"Well, I'm sending an escort with you half-way across," I said. "Lashmar will go – you know him? – in No. 1 Patrol Boat. It's heavily armed, and he can shoot straighter than any man in the service. Got his experience in the Great War."

"Escort be blowed!" said hearty Captain Swainson. "I can't think what old Pring was about to let himself be held up like that – though, of course, it's just as you wish, Sir John."

"I don't suppose there's the least need of it, Swainson. But this business'll make a bit of a noise, and it looks well. Now I'll tell you a secret. I'm engaged to be married! Settled it coming down in the train this morning."

"The deuce you are! A thousand congratulations!"

"Thanks. What's more, the lady is aboard your ship, and flies to New York with you to-night. I want you to look after her for me."

"Can a duck swim? Well, this *is* news! Now I understand about that escort! But do introduce me, Sir John. It will be more than a pleasure to make the young lady comfortable."

We went off to seek Connie, and found her sitting behind one of the multiplex wind-screens on the saloon deck, listening to the music of a piano and violin that came through the open hatch of the palm-court below.

I remember that the musicians were playing a selection of old English airs, sweet, plaintive music, and had just got to "The Last Rose of Summer."

I'm not emotional, but when I hear that tune to-day – thank goodness, it isn't often! – I go out of the room.

At a quarter to nine I stood on the Hoe and watched the *Atlantis* start for America. Her navigation lights were all turned on; the innumerable port-holes of the huge fusilage made an

amber necklace below the immense grey planes.

Then, from the towers on the sea-drome wall the "flare-path" shot out – an avenue of white and steady light to guide the liner outwards. From the roof of the A.P. Station the compressed air-horn sent out three long, brazen calls. I had arranged it so. It was my Godspeed to Constance. Old Swainson answered on his Klaxon, and then the liner began to move slowly over the glittering water. Every second she increased her speed and lifted until she rose clear and slanted upwards. I had a vision of the mysterious silvery thing like a moth in the centre of the light-beam, and then the flare-path shifted out to sea, and rose till it was almost at a right angle with the water. The *Atlantis* was spiralling up to her ten-thousand-foot level, and in a moment or two she was nothing more than a speck.

Just as I lost sight of her, Patrol Ship No. 1 lifted and followed like a hawk after a heron, and then both ships were lost in the night.

The band on Plymouth Pier was still playing. The young men and maidens were still strolling round the lawns in the moonlight. The air was sweet and pure, full of laughter and the voices of girls. But I went back to the station with a heavy heart.

Two shorthand clerks and two telegraphists were waiting for me, and in the next hour I got through an infinity of work. There was a mass of telegrams to answer from America. They had been re-wired from Whitehall. I had to send out fifty or sixty signals to organize a complete patrol of the Atlantic air-lanes. There was a

long and confidential "wireless" to my assistant, Muir Lockhart, in London, and last, though by no means least, a condensed report of everything for the Home Secretary. It was after ten when I had finished, and I walked slowly back to the "Royal," dead tired in mind and body. When I came to think of it, I realized that this had been one of the most eventful and exciting days of my life.

Thumbwood – you will hear a great deal about him before this narrative is over – was waiting in the hall. He hurried me upstairs to where a tepid bath dashed with ammonia was waiting. Five minutes in this, a brisk rub down, a complete change into evening kit, a tea-cup of Bovril with a tablespoon of brandy and a pinch of celery salt in it – what Thumbwood called my "bran-mash" – and I was a new man again.

For a perfect valet commend me a man who has had charge of racehorses in his time!

Then I went down to meet Captain Pring. I saw at once, as I came into the public rooms of the hotel, that the news was out. Groups of people were standing together and talking earnestly. There was a buzz of suppressed excitement, natural anywhere, but particularly so in the principal air-port of England.

And there were special editions of the evening papers…

These – I got one and looked – had made the most of very scanty material. Nothing like the whole truth had leaked out, but there was, nevertheless, a sensation of the first magnitude. I was recognized and pointed to; a naval captain even spoke, and tried to pump me! – though he soon found that there was nothing

doing – and when Captain Pring came into the lounge some idiot started to cheer, and there was what the papers describe as a "scene."

Pring and I supped alone in a private room and had a long confidential talk, in the course of which I learnt many things. I am not going to give any details of that talk at present. It was momentous – it is enough to say that now – and has its proper place further on in the story.

The worthy Captain went at twelve, and I retired to bed. Thumbwood slept in a dressing-room opening out of my bedroom. By his couch was a telephone, which I arranged was to be connected with the A.P. Station all night long. If any signal came Thumbwood was to take it, and, if important, wake me at once.

… I am going to conclude this first portion of the narrative in as few lines as possible. Even to-day I shirk the writing of them.

I was awakened suddenly to find my room blazing with light; I afterwards found that the exact time was 2.30 a.m.

Thumbwood was standing by the bed. "Sir John," he said hoarsely, "there's a signal!"

One glance at the lad's face was enough, and I set my teeth – hard.

"Bad news?"

"Terrible news, Sir John!"

"Go on."

"*Atlantis* attacked two hundred miles west of Cork. Captain

Swainson and four other men shot dead. Patrol Boat No. 1 disabled. Commander Lashmar and most of the crew killed. Signal got through by two survivors of crew, who managed to repair wireless."

Twice I swallowed with a dry mouth. Thumbwood knew what I wanted to ask.

"The young lady, Sir John, and her maid …"

"Dead, too?"

"No, Sir John. They were taken from among all the other passengers and put aboard the pirate ship, which then flew away with them."

CHAPTER IV
THE NEWSPAPERS IN FULL CRY

You are to imagine, if you please, the private room of the Chief Commissioner of Air Police at Whitehall.

A soft Turkey carpet of dull brick-reds and blues covers the parquet floor. The walls are hung with pictures of famous airmen of the past, inventors, fighters, pioneers of the great commercial service of air-liners which now fills the skies and has shrunk the planet – for all practical purposes – to a fifth of its former size. There are two or three huge writing-tables covered with crimson morocco; the chairs are thickly padded and luxurious. A range of tall windows looks down upon the endless stir and movement of the wide street, where the nerves of Empire meet in one central ganglion.

Standing by one of these windows is a light-haired young man of thirty in a lounge suit of dark blue. He wears a rather heavy, carefully-trimmed moustache, and his face is seamed and furrowed with anxiety and grey from want of rest.

Thus you see me in London, two days after Thumbwood brought the terrible news to my bedroom in the hotel at Plymouth.

General Sir Hercules Nichelson, Commander-in-Chief of the Royal Flying Corps, had been with me for half an hour, and was

just taking his leave.

"Then all that is satisfactorily arranged, Sir John," he said. "We shall supplement your patrol ships with three war-ships at Plymouth and three at the Scillies. They will, of course, be air cruisers, both faster and better armed than your boats, and between us both we shall put an end to this pest before many days are over."

"I sincerely trust so," I said. "And I do not see how it is possible that there should be any further outrages. The net will be too close. America, with its much greater coastal area, is taking extraordinary precautions."

"It will be impossible for these devilish scoundrels to escape," the General repeated with confidence – the onus of it all was not falling upon *him!*– "and now, we quite understand one another."

"Perfectly, I think, Sir Hercules."

"Your chief station officer is to be in full command, under you, at each air-port."

"It was your suggestion, Sir Hercules, and since it came from you, I do think it would be best. My men are always patrolling the air-lines. The organization is complete already."

"Exactly. And as for my fellows, they will be proud to serve under such gallant and experienced officers as those of the A.P."

"It's kind of you to say so."

"Not at all. It is the truth. And now, as an older man, let me give you a little advice, if I am not taking a liberty. Don't let this affect you too much, Sir John. Every sane man knows that neither

you nor anyone else could have avoided what has happened, or have provided against it. It is a great thing to have an acute sense of responsibility; I honour you for it. But don't overdo it. I know the strain you are enduring. Don't let it go too far. If you were to break down now, that would be a final disaster…"

The kind, white-haired old man shook me warmly by the hand, and left the room.

Almost immediately young Bickenhall, my private secretary, came in. "Here is the morning's Press, sir," he said, and upon my table he put down various columns cut from the journals of that morning – all dealing with the sensational and terrible events on the Atlantic that were now the common knowledge of the world.

I sat down to glance through them – I was keeping an iron grip upon myself these times – in order to gauge public opinion. It occurs to me that, in order to acquaint you with the progress of events from my awakening at Plymouth till the morning of which I speak, I cannot do better than quote a paragraph here and there from the daily papers. It will bring us up to date more quickly and concisely than in any other way.

This, then, from one of the leading London journals, a weighty, somewhat ponderous sheet, with considerable influence:

"… We have given an account of the first attack upon the air-liner *Albatros*, under command of Captain Pring, whose conduct in such a trying situation did not deviate from the best traditions of our British aviators. Most people would have thought that after

such a dastardly outrage, the unknown pirate would have been content to rest upon his infamous laurels and retire to his lair, with the valuable booty he had secured. But it was not so. With an audacity unparalleled in the annals of crime, this vulture, on the very next night, commits an outrage which, for ferocity and daring, makes the first one seem like a mere frolic.

"It is now possible to disentangle something of the truth from the various conflicting stories that have reached us, and it is, moreover, confirmed in its essential details by the authorities of the Air Police at Whitehall, who have issued a guarded statement.

"It appears that two nights ago the famous air-liner *Atlantis* left the Plymouth sea-drome about nine in the evening. The Captain, Commander Pilot Swainson, was one of the best known and trusted officers in the Transatlantic service. He did not anticipate the slightest danger. Sir John Custance, Chief Commissioner of the Air Police of Great Britain, was himself at Plymouth, having hurried down from London upon receiving news of the first piracy. Sir John insisted that the *Atlantis* should be escorted, for half of her journey to America, by the armed Patrol Ship '1,' under command of Superintendent Pilot-Commander Lashmar, D.S.O., himself an officer of great distinction. Half-way across the Atlantic the liner was to be met by a similar escort of the United States A.P., and let us here say that it is difficult to tell what other precautions Sir John Custance could have devised.

"The *Atlantis* carried the Royal Mail and a full complement of passengers, among whom were some distinguished names.

Mr. Bootfeller, of the United States Senate, Mr. Greenwell, the well-known publisher, the Duke of Perth, and 'Walty Priest,' the cinema 'star,' were among the men, while in the list of ladies was Miss Constance Shepherd, a young actress, of whom it is not too much to say that she has endeared herself to the British public.

"About two o'clock in the morning disastrous and terrible news began to filter through to the Plymouth wireless stations. It can be summarized as follows: When not more than two hundred and fifty miles west of Ireland, the patrol ship, which was flying three miles or so behind the *Atlantis*, was suddenly attacked by an unknown airship. The moon had set, the ten-thousand-feet level was dark, and the attack was delivered without the slightest warning. Patrol Ship No. 1 was instantly disabled by a rain of shells. Captain Lashmar was shot dead, and with him perished all of the crew except three men, one of whom was so seriously wounded that his life is despaired of, the other two being only slightly wounded.

"An utter wreck, the patrol ship was just able to descend to the water, where she rested like a wounded and dying bird.

"Meanwhile the unknown ship caught up with the *Atlantis* and commenced – as in the case of the *Albatros*– with shooting away her wireless aerials. The rudder and stern propeller were then destroyed, and the great liner forced to plane to the surface of the water. Six masked and armed ruffians went aboard of her, and a systematic looting of the ship commenced. Captain Swainson could not bear this. He drew a revolver and shot one of

the pirates dead. Then, calling on his crew to assist him, he made a determined rush, regardless of consequences. The fight was unequal. Captain Swainson was the only defender who carried fire-arms, while the robbers were provided with heavy automatic pistols.

"Five men of the *Atlantis* were killed almost instantly, and the rest cowed, while the systematic robbery continued. And now, alas! 'horrors upon horror's head accumulate.' Their evil work completed, the ruffians sought out Miss Constance Shepherd and her maid, Miss Wilson, from among the passengers. These unfortunate ladies were forced at the pistol's mouth to embark upon the pirates' small boat, in which they were rowed rapidly to the pirate ship and taken on board. The ship then rose from the water and was lost to sight.

"Meanwhile two heroes were at work. On board the broken patrol ship two able navigators, Paget and Fowles, were wounded, indeed, but not entirely disabled. Both men had some knowledge of wireless, and with superhuman toil, as the hours went on, they contrived to rig up a temporary apparatus which, at last, served to send out a brief account of the disaster and a call for help.

"When rescue ships arrived at early dawn, they found that the patrol ship had drifted close to the *Atlantis*, and that Dr. Weatherall, the surgeon of the liner, had swum aboard the No. 1 and rendered what help he could to the wounded men.

"Press representatives are at Plymouth, but, so far, few of the passengers of the *Atlantis* have been able, and none have

been allowed by the authorities, to make personal statements for publication. This embargo, we are assured, will be removed by this evening.

"This is a precise account of what has happened. We must now turn to the consideration of the situation…"

Another journal, a weekly one this time, headed its remarks with a portrait of my unhappy self. Underneath was written: "The Man the Atlantic Pirates tricked!" The rag had an immense circulation in all the tap rooms of England.

Well, I would see what the blackguards of the country were reading about me. Shrewd young Bickenhall wouldn't have brought the unclean thing in if he hadn't thought it worth while. I give it for what it's worth:

"Poor Johnny Custance! You're up against it good and thick to-day, and no mistake, and Paul Pry" – this was the signature of the tout who wrote the article – "can't say he's very sorry for you. For some time past a little bird has been whispering in the clubs that all is not well in the State of Denmark – to wit, the office of the Commissioner of Air Police at Whitehall. The aristocratic young gentlemen who daily condescend to drop into this palatial edifice for an hour or two have long held the reputation of being the best dressed of all our minor Government officials, and, considering the salaries they draw from the public purse, this is not surprising. But I have never yet heard that they did any work worth mentioning, or, indeed, anything to justify their precious and beautiful existence.

"Flying Police we must have, and never has the necessity for them been greater than at this moment; but there is a vast deal of difference from the handy pilot of a patrol ship at Plymouth or Portland and the bureaucratic popinjays of Pall Mall.

"Sir John Custance, Bart., is the typical Government official of the musical comedy or the comic paper. He is an aristocrat who, after a short experience in the air, is shoved into the highly-paid and responsible position he holds without any reason that the man in the street can understand. A baronet, and, if report speaks truly, a man of considerable private means, I have – in common with many other people – often asked myself what possible qualification this young gentleman can have for his job. Johnny is a most estimable person, no doubt, in private life. I have heard it remarked that his moustache is one of the most perfect things in the West End of London, and he is frequently to be seen adorning a stall or box at the Parthenon Theatre. But few people have ever taken him seriously as the head of our Air Police, and now nobody will."

There was a row of stars here, as if Mr. Paul Pry paused for breath, or was stopping to pick up another handful of mud, and then he went on again:

"If the nation is called upon to pay thousands and thousands a year for the upkeep of an efficient service of Air Police, it is entitled to see that it gets it, and that the man in charge is able to provide it. What has happened? A crew of murdering ruffians in an airship have looted two of our greatest air-liners, slaughtered

several people, kidnapped one of our most popular actresses, and escaped scot-free. Vanished into the wide! While Sir John Custance twiddles his thumbs in Whitehall and calls upon the air forces of the Admiralty and War Office to supplement his own miserably inefficient organization.

"As usual, we are not without some very special and exclusive information in this office. My readers know from past experience that their Paul is not easily caught napping. I believe that I shall have something to say that will startle everyone in next week's number, though, for certain reasons, I cannot be more explicit at present. Before concluding these remarks, however, I must say a word or two about the extraordinary and sinister disappearance of delightful Constance Shepherd. Sad as it is to hear of brave men shot down while doing their duty, there is something peculiarly terrible in the carrying off of the little lady to whom London owes so much. Dear little Connie! We of Bohemia knew and loved you well! Many is the happy hour that Paul Pry has spent in your company, many the bumper of bubbly water he has quaffed to your success!

"No one could possibly have foreseen such a tragic ending to the American journey which Miss Shepherd set out upon with such high hopes. And yet, there was not wanting a slight shadow of premonition. Only a week ago she said to me: 'Paul, I'm not so sure, after all, that everything will go well. There are certain things. I can't tell you of them – ' But I must refrain from betraying a confidence. Let it be enough to say that my little

friend had her moments of dejection, when she was not entirely happy about the future."

I put down the paper and rang for Bickenhall. "You've read this, I suppose?" I asked, pointing to it.

He nodded. "Lies, of course," he said; "mere words to fill up the column."

"No doubt. Still, the man hints all sorts of things, damn him! And one can't neglect any possible clue." I was in a raging fury, and Bickenhall saw it, though he was far from suspecting the true cause.

"The office is in the Strand," he said, "three minutes by taxi. I'll go and interview this Paul Pry and put the fear of God into him."

I knew my Bickenhall. He is an energetic and hefty young man, and though I had little hopes that he would discover anything of value, I had a shrewd suspicion that Mr. Paul Pry was about to experience a peculiarly unpleasant ten minutes.

I was right in both my conjectures.

The secretary returned in half an hour. "Just a ramp," he said. "I found a greasy ruffian smelling of gin in a back room, and frightened him out of his life. He's never met Miss Shepherd, and has no private information whatever. Will apologize in any manner you like."

I am not going to bother you with what the journalists wrote. There were hundreds of columns of suggestions, conjecture, reproof, alarm, and so forth. On the whole my department was

let down fairly lightly, and I was glad. Please don't think that I cared twopence for myself. I did not. But I should have bitterly resented any serious reflections on my staff, officers and men, who were, and are, as able and loyal a body as can be found anywhere in the world.

CHAPTER V THE FAMILIAR SPIRIT OF MR. VAN ADAMS

At mid-day I had an appointment with the Home Secretary. He received me with the utmost kindness, and we had half an hour of highly confidential talk. The purport of it will appear later. This is not the place for it.

Towards the end I informed him that I had a request to make.

"Tell me," he answered at once, "and let me repeat that the Government has every confidence in you, Sir John. Don't take this too hardly, I beg of you."

I had a sudden impulse. "I trust," I said, "that my anxiety for the public welfare is in no degree overshadowed by a private sorrow. Indeed, I am sure that it isn't. But, if I may speak in confidence, I should like you to know, sir, that I was engaged to be married to Miss Constance Shepherd."

There was a perceptible silence. I heard the great man take a long inward breath, and murmur to himself, "Poor fellow!" Then he did the right, the quite perfect thing: he stretched out his hand, and took mine in a firm, warm grasp.

When I could speak, I returned to business.

"My request, sir, is this. I want to disappear for a month."

"Disappear, Sir John?"

"That's what it amounts to. Practically, I am going to ask for

four weeks' leave of absence. It must be private, though. If the news were published the public would misunderstand, and think I was deserting my post in a time of difficulty and danger."

"Whereas?"

"Whereas I want to investigate this affair in my own way. I believe that the theories of the Press and public, and also those of Scotland Yard – with whom I have been in consultation – are quite wrong. Nor do my communications with America give me any reason to change my opinion. This is a matter of life and death to me. I owe the Government, who have promoted me so rapidly to the high position I occupy, a solution of this mystery. I owe them and the public that the fiends who have committed these outrages should be brought to justice. And, if God allows me, I will do it. My honour and that of my department are at stake. Those two things come before anything else. In addition, I have the private reasons of which I have told you. And, in order to succeed, I am persuaded that my way is the only way."

"You have certainly the strongest motives a man well could have to urge you on. But can you be a little more explicit?"

"I want to leave Mr. Muir Lockhart in charge at the office. He is perfectly capable of taking charge. He has everything at his fingers' ends. And I shall arrange that he can always communicate with me at any time."

The Home Secretary thought for a moment, and drummed with his fingers on the arm of his chair. He had been a famous barrister, and renowned for the perfection of his turn-out. His

finger-nails were pink and polished as the light fell upon them, and I wondered if he had them manicured.

Then he looked up. "Very well, do as you like," he said suddenly. "I take it that you know what you're about. And heartfelt good wishes for your success."

… This is how I plunged into a series of dangerous adventures, a dark underworld of crime and almost superhuman cunning, probably without parallel in modern times.

Arrangements were soon made at Whitehall. Muir Lockhart was an understanding man, and by three o'clock in the afternoon I walked out into the sunshine free from all official cares for a month. I took a long, deep breath as I crossed the Horse Guards Parade and made my way to the long, green vista of the Mall. "The first act is over," I thought. "The curtain is rising on the real drama. Somewhere in this world there is a man whose discovery and death I owe to Society and to myself."

And I was a man who never failed to pay a debt.

I have given you but little indication of my mental state during the last few days. It won't bear much writing about even now. A cold fury, instead of blood, came and went in my veins, and my heart was ice. Every now and again, especially when I was alone, agony for which there is, there can be, no name got hold of me, and sported with me as the wind sports with a leaf. I suppose I had a tiny foretaste of what is felt by a soul that is eternally damned. I *dared* not think too much of Constance and her fate. If I had let myself go that way the running waters would have

risen and overwhelmed me utterly. But, thank God, my intellect held. The streak of hardness which had served me so well in my career, and had enabled me to push to the top at an early age, came to the rescue now. Every faculty was sharpened; the will concentrated to a single purpose. I was alone, and I walked in darkness, but I was conscious of Power – charged to the brim as a battery is charged with the electric fluid. As I walked calmly up St. James', on the way to my chambers, I doubt if a more single-minded and dangerous man than I walked the streets of London.

And I knew, by some mysterious intuition, that I should succeed in the task before me. I had not, as yet, more than the most rudimentary idea how I was going to set about it, but I should succeed. Don't misunderstand me. I had hardly any hope of seeing my dear love alive again. I believed that all the joy of life was finally extinguished. But justice – call it vengeance rather – remained, and I was as sure that I was the chosen instrument of that as I was that I had just passed between Marlborough House and the Palace of St. James.

My expensive but delightful chambers in Half Moon Street were on the second floor – sitting-room, dining-room, bed and dressing rooms and bath.

The sitting-room was panelled in cedar-wood, which had been stained a delicate olive-green, with the mouldings of the panels picked out in dull gold. Connie and her gay young friends, when they came to have tea with me, or supper after the theatre, used to say that it was one of the most charming rooms in London.

I had spent an infinity of time and money on it, determined that it should be "just so." For instance, the carpet was from Kairowan in Tunisia, and had taken a whole family of Arab weavers five years to make. Never was there a more perfect blue – not the crude peacock colour of the cheaper Oriental rugs, but a blue infused with a silver-ash shade, contrasting marvellously with the warm brick-reds and tawny yellows. It was a bargain at four hundred pounds.

I had hung only half a dozen pictures in this room, all modern and all good. My "Boys Bathing," by Charles Conder – better known as the painter of marvellous fans – was a masterpiece of sunlight and sea foam which made me the envy of half the collectors in town. Then I had a William Nicholson – "Chelsea Ware" – that was extraordinarily fascinating. It was just some old Chelsea plates and a jug standing on a table. It doesn't sound fascinating, I know, but the painting was so brilliant, there was such vision in the way it was seen, that one could look at it for hours.

There was an open hearth of rough red brick in the room, deep and square, and when there was a fire it burned in a gipsy brazier of iron. I had a lot of trouble to get this last of the right shape, and finally it had to be made for me, from the design of an artist in Birmingham.

Such a room, with its perfect colour harmonies and severe lines, required no knick-knacks. Nothing small or petty, however beautiful in itself, could be allowed there. I had two cabinets of

magnificent china in my dining-room, but china would have been quite out of place here. Along one wall, about four feet from the floor, was a single shelf of old pewter – cups and flagons of the Tudor period with the double-rose hall-mark – and that was all.

As I entered and flung myself wearily into a chair, the afternoon sunlight poured in through the half-drawn curtains of sea-green silk. In the ceiling a hidden electric fan was whirring, and the room was deliciously cool. And as I looked round, the place seemed hateful beyond all expression. I was sick of it, loathed its beauty and comfort; an insane desire came to take a hammer and wreak havoc there as my eyes fell on the only photograph in the room. It was one of Constance, in a frame of dull silver, studded with turquoises, and she had given it to me no longer than a fortnight ago.

Thumbwood slept at the top of the house. He came in, after I had been resting for a few minutes.

"I've made the necessary arrangements, Charles," I said, "and we shall start operations at once." I had no secrets from this devoted friend and servant.

"Glad to hear it, Sir John. I've been round the town this morning, and there's a lot of talk."

He followed me into the sitting-room and brought me cigars.

"You see," he went on confidentially, "a gentleman's servant, especially if he belongs to the club just off Jermyn Street, and more specially still if he's been a racing man, hears all that's going on quicker than anyone. This morning I've been talking to the

porters and valets of two of the best clubs, Sir John. Then I 'ad a crack with Meggit, the bookmaker, what does all the St. James' smaller commissions, and after that I strolled to the Parthenon Theatre, and took out the stage door-keeper and filled him up and made 'im talk a bit. 'Im and me is great friends consequent of my taking so many messages and flowers for you, sir, when Miss Shepherd was acting there."

"Ah! I see you haven't wasted your time." I smiled inwardly at Thumbwood's idea of helping me.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.